

Evensong

Part Two: The War of Roses



#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

L. J. Smith

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by L. J. Smith

*Dedicated to my readers, worldwide. Thank you, friends,
for your many messages of kindness and appreciation.*

Please let me know what you think of this fanfic!

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Foreword by L. J. Smith

Once again, for anyone who may have missed it: this is an episodic adventure fanfiction story. It is *not* one of the official books in *The Vampire Diaries* series, nor is it meant to replace these books. This fanfic takes place in an alternate world from the official books that follow *Midnight*.

Normally, I would not release the beginning of Part Two along with the entirety of Part One, but I do have my reasons. For one thing, it didn't seem quite fair to Bonnie fans to only release the Elena scenes in *Part One: Paradise Lost*, and not do this.

Again, I'm not certain how many different parts there will be to this work, but I do plan to spend the time that I can afford to take off from my professional writing, until this complicated love story/episodic adventure is finished. And, yes, that means until The End.

As for who gets married just after midnight amidst a constellation of rose-shaped candles and tapers in a half-ruined chapel in Dyer Wood (and yes, with the bride wearing black, while the bridesmaids wear red and all carry black or red roses) . . . I'm still not going to identify the bride or groom. You'll have to wait until I post that section in order to find out.

As always, I would like to give my thanks to my agent, John Silbersack of Trident Media. You are reading this story because of his efforts, and if it is any good, he made it better.

My most sincere gratitude as well to Amazon and Kindle Worlds for giving me a place to house this fanfic and for welcoming me so warmly.

I would also like to thank (as ever!) Julie, Christina, Toni, Frini, Jesa, Jan, and Usok of Usok Choe Designs. Without their help, encouragement, brainstorming, kibitzing, last-minute coding and consideration for my welfare, I would never have been able to write a page of *Evensong*.

I do actually mean it when I say write to me to give your opinion of this episodic literary adventure. Please email me at info@ljanessmith.net. I may even write back to you! Or else visit me at <http://www.ljanessmith.net>, like me on Facebook at

<https://www.facebook.com/ljsmithauthorofvampirediaries> or follow me on Twitter [@drujienna](#).

Cheers,

Lisa

Evensong

Part Two:

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by L. J. Smith

*“A flower unplucked is but left to the falling,
And nothing is gained by not gathering roses.”*

— Robert Frost

Bonnie was headed for Biology 101, her first class of the day. She had given up trying to convince Meredith to stop following her, even though she knew that Meredith was going to miss her own classes. Bonnie’s pride was injured—as if she couldn’t take care of herself in the sunlight, with ordinary students streaming all around her!

She walked as fast as she could, but the *tac-tac* of Meredith’s shoes still kept up by her side. Of course, Meredith had longer legs, which was another injustice.

It was insanely cold for the end of September and the watery sun in the sky did nothing at all to warm the morning air. Bonnie shivered inside her thick wool sweater.

The good thing about Dalcrest College was that it was quite small, which made it easy to walk from one place to another on campus. Bonnie reached Lerner Hall before her nose was completely frozen, and she turned for the first time to look at Meredith.

“Are you really going to follow me in?” she asked piteously.

“Of course,” Meredith said, with grim determination in her dark gray eyes. “I’m going to sit in Biology with you, too.”

“Dr. Reichard is going to be mad at you,” Bonnie said feebly.

“Let her. I’m auditing the class—just because I’m dying to learn about the insides of a fetal pig.”

Bonnie turned back in frustration. She knew that under that determination Meredith was no happier about shadowing her than she was about being shadowed. It was ridiculous, but Damon really wanted it, and neither of them was good at refusing Damon. He was always so thoughtful and reasonable—and really, really good looking. Bonnie wished she’d had a chance to speak to Elena this morning, but somehow . . . things had been too rushed.

Elena should be all right now, though, she told herself. Damon won’t let anything bad happen to her.

Meredith made a sound of impatience. A dozen students had just walked into the building in front of them.

“Are we going inside or not?”

“We are,” Bonnie said resignedly. She hurried up the steps and into the open double doors—

Ouch!

She’d bumped into solid wood. Bonnie blinked and blinked again.

The doors were closed.

But that was impossible.

It had to be—was she so late that they had closed the whole building? And how had they done it while she was climbing the steps?

Bonnie rattled the doors once more to find that they were definitely locked, and turned around to ask Meredith what was going on.

Meredith had vanished. Bonnie shivered violently. She opened her mouth to call, but no sound came out. Worst of all, something had dimmed the sun. She could hardly see.

I must be having one of those trance-things, Bonnie thought desperately. But why am I so cold? And what’s going on in the real world? And why—why can’t I remember having breakfast or choosing my clothes this morning?

Bonnie shivered again violently . . . and woke up.

It was the middle of the night. She'd been dreaming—but, oh, God, there was Lerner Hall, all right! The big double doors were closed and locked. The sky was dark with no moon and about a billion stars and Bonnie was in her calf-length white cotton nightgown. Her bare feet were freezing. Meredith wasn't in sight.

In her place, there was a large and beautiful white dog standing on the steps.

Bonnie automatically put a hand on its head. “Good boy, good boy,” she murmured vaguely.

Oh, my God, oh, my God! she was thinking. I sleepwalked! I really did it! In my nightgown! I've got to get back to my room.

Meredith is going to be furious.

Bonnie was still looking at herself in bewilderment. It was so *cold*. The wind made it even colder, slicing through her thin nightgown as if it wasn't there. How could she not have felt that? How could she have walked barefoot all this way and never felt the concrete?

But there was no point in standing here any longer and wondering. Other people were bound to be up and around campus. They might see her at any minute. In her nightgown!

This horrific thought was enough to get her moving, her face hot with embarrassment. Slowly, wincing as she placed each foot on the ground, Bonnie went down the steps. The dog followed her, and she felt subtly comforted by its presence.

No wonder I dreamed you were Meredith, she thought, examining the dog while walking. It was a gorgeous animal, with pure white fur and golden eyes. It had a lot of fur around its face and neck and very long legs with enormous feet. Its tail jutted out like a horizontal brushstroke. It didn't wag, even when Bonnie petted it, but it did hold still and look vaguely pleased, tongue lolling.

It looked like an Alaskan Husky. A cousin of hers had owned an Alaskan Husky, and it had been as thickly furred as this dog, although it hadn't been as beautifully big and white.

“Who do you belong to?” Bonnie asked conversationally as she hurried along, uncrossing her arm from her chest to pet it again. “You don't have a collar.”

The dog glanced up at her, as if listening for a word like “walkies” or “dinner.” Bonnie suddenly found herself intensely and specifically glad to have him as a companion. She was terrified of meeting someone who would laugh at her, or worse. What if it was a guy? There was no way to hide; she didn’t dare leave the concrete pathway with its really-quite-distantly-spaced lampposts for the shelter of trees where she might be less conspicuous.

A wicked draft blew straight up her nightgown and she realized that she was shivering uncontrollably. The white dog with the golden eyes looked at her, tongue still lolling.

Please, God, Bonnie thought, resisting an impulse to clasp her hands together because she was already hugging herself, trying to keep warm. Please don’t let Meredith wake up and find that I’m gone from my bed. Please don’t let Meredith *ever* find out that I’ve been parading around campus in the middle of the night, with a strange dog as my only hope of protection!

“But I did it in my sleep,” she said out loud. At that, the big dog looked up as if sympathetically. “And how I am supposed to watch out for myself when I’m not even awake? It isn’t my *fault*.”

She was talking, she realized, to keep her spirits up. This sudden understanding brought tears to her eyes and a piteous little whimpering sound to her throat.

The white dog, still looking up at her, echoed her whimper with a tiny whine.

“Oh, you good boy,” Bonnie said again. Suddenly curious, she bent to check whether her choice of words was correct and saw that the dog was, indeed, a male. “You make me feel better. *What* a good boy!”

Still, she felt badly enough as she followed the path, which seemed to have gotten ten times longer at night than it had ever been in the daytime.

If only she could call . . . call someone for help . . . somehow. Bonnie shook her head, frustrated. She wasn’t even sure what she meant but there was something in her mind that believed she could just yell and . . . *someone* . . . would find her. No cell phone needed.

But that was insanity. It was the same kind of thinking as whatever had caused her to say

terrible things to Elena earlier and then faint and hit her head and not even remember what she'd said. If anyone needed more evidence that she was having a break with reality, this little night's excursion should convince them.

Suddenly the unpleasant and somehow cobwebby thoughts she was struggling with were brushed away by a frightening conviction. She felt as if someone was looking at her. Not merely looking at her, but *staring* at the back of her neck with malicious intent.

Slowly, Bonnie turned her head to look behind her.

With a shock, she realized that she had been correct. There were two large dogs—*very* large dogs—padding along the concrete pathway, coming straight toward her. Bonnie felt her eyes go wide at the sight. The animals were Alaskan Huskies, too, but their coloring was different from her companion's. They were sort of brindled on top and white on their stomachs.

They were the biggest dogs she'd ever seen in her life, except for . . . *darn it!* She'd had a flash of an image of a black dog the size of a small pony. But of course she didn't know any dog like that!

Definitely I'm going crazy.

There was a truly pathetic whimper and for a moment Bonnie thought it came from her own throat. Then she realized it was the white dog. His tail was no longer horizontal; it had curled completely down and under his belly. His head was down, his body was held low to the ground, and his ears were so flattened that it almost looked as if he had none.

"Some help you are!" Bonnie gasped involuntarily. For a moment she wished she had Yangtze, her mother's spoiled, fat Pekinese who had died last year. He would be no good in a fight, but at least he would put up a shrill yapping that sounded vicious. The white dog was whimpering and, she realized, actually trying to hide behind her.

"Good boy, you're a great big coward!" Bonnie muttered. But she couldn't pay attention to him now.

The other dogs were approaching fast. Their eyes seemed to reflect yellow light at Bonnie.

Their tails were held erect and their muzzles were shut—no lazy tongue lolling. Their paws made only the faintest of sounds as they loped in for . . .

For the kill, some faraway part of Bonnie's mind said matter-of-factly. These weren't domestic dogs at all. They were feral. They were hunting her and they were going to attack her when they reached her.

But she couldn't run. She *couldn't*. Her legs were paralyzed beneath her, and besides her brain was telling her that running was a *really* stupid thing to do. The wild dogs' legs were so long that they would catch up in seconds.

Desperately, Bonnie looked around her for some kind of aid. Even a rock . . . no! There! A big stick was lying just a few feet off the concrete pathway. It must have broken off from a tree and been carried here by the wind.

Before she even finished recognizing what the stick was, Bonnie had it in her hand. She had jumped back in front of the trembling white dog and brandished the stick like a baseball bat, not even caring how silly she must look.

The dogs were so close that she could see their yellow eyes clearly, and see the feral coldness in their expression. Neither of them were snarling or even baring teeth. Was that how wild dogs hunted? In silence, ready to jump without warning?

The branch was heavy in her hand and she planned on aiming at sensitive ears and noses.

Some part of Bonnie understood that she was so deeply in shock that every thought was abnormal. But she couldn't feel that in her gut. There she was, grimly hefting her bit of splintered wood, where a wiser head would have simply realized that she was going to be severely mauled and probably die even if she got in one or two blows.

The white dog whimpered again, a pleading, puppy-like sound. And suddenly, astonishingly, Bonnie felt a flame of outrage sear through her. These animals were undoubtedly cruel enough to kill a smaller animal who was terrified. They were hateful and wrong, and bad, *bad* dogs! She was going to hit them hard before they dragged her down.

As the two animals reached her Bonnie gritted her teeth and braced for the attack. She felt the white dog's hot breath on her calves; she sensed the bad dogs poisoning themselves to leap, and—

“DOWN!”

The shout came from behind her. Bonnie choked. She froze with wide-stretched eyes, afraid to glance over her shoulder; afraid to turn her back on the wild dogs.

She watched what happened, half-wondering if it was somehow another dream. The brindled dogs, who had already started to leap, acted as if they had run into something solid in the night air. Their long legs folded beneath them as they appeared to bounce off an invisible barrier, and they landed on the pathway more or less in a “down” position.

Should I smack them? I think maybe they need to be smacked, Bonnie thought. She could see the frustrated yellow gleam of their wicked eyes.

But their ears were flat now, and their tails were tucked under. They looked angry, but they also looked beaten. They almost seemed to be afraid to move, as well, and Bonnie couldn't bring herself to hit animals that seemed glued in place.

Slowly, she lowered her arms, and at the same time realized that they were quivering with unreleased tension. She watched as her trembling hands let go of the branch and it hit the concrete.

“And just what were you going to do with that, redbird?”

It was Damon's voice. Bonnie turned around without a thought for the bad dogs. Damon himself was standing on the pathway. He was smiling at her.

“I don't know exactly what I was going to do,” Bonnie said, feeling self-conscious, but unable to help smiling shakily back. “I guess—whatever I could.”

“But weren't you scared?”

“I was scared to death—too scared not to do *something*. The big white dog was even more scared than I was and I had to try to use that stick. I guess I was going to jam the splintery end into the bad dogs' noses.”

“The bad—? Ah. Hm,” Damon said, taking a moment to look over the feral dogs sprawled

and cowering on the concrete.

Bonnie looked, too. The animals' eyes were fairly glowing with fire, and their hair was bristled up all over their backs. But even as Bonnie stared, they seemed to cower away from her, almost as if they heard some angry voice that she couldn't make out.

Damon turned back to her. "You know what, redbird? I think that you've been very brave tonight. You were going to try to fight those . . . bad dogs . . . with only a pointed stick. And you didn't even scream out loud."

"Well, I was screaming *inloud* plenty," Bonnie confided, pleased with the new word she had discovered. "And I never was so glad to see—or hear—anyone as when you came!" Suddenly and quite spontaneously, she threw her arms around him.

Damon squeezed her tightly for a moment and then quickly rubbed her back, as if trying to warm her. "You're all frozen, little redbird," he said, his voice worried. "You can't fly like this; you'll ice up your feathers."

Bonnie giggled because he sounded so serious. She looked up at him—meaning to make some silly comment about needing a swig of antifreeze; she remembered that hipflask of his from the hospital—when suddenly everything in the world stopped.

Damon was looking down at her with an expression she had never seen before. At least, she'd never seen it directed toward her before. His dark eyes seemed to be filled with stars, just like the brilliant stars that blazed overhead in the moonless sky.

He looked almost puzzled, as if he was wondering over her, trying to make out whether she was mostly funny or mostly . . . something else. Something that made the breath catch in Bonnie's throat.

He took off his jacket and wrapped it around her, but he did it absent-mindedly, all the time looking down at her intently. Bonnie shivered once as she felt the warm leather encasing her—warm from Damon's body heat. The jacket actually seemed to generate warmth that radiated through Bonnie all the way down to her chilly toes.

But this fact passed through her mind only vaguely, because right now Bonnie was thinking with her heart. She felt spellbound, wrapped not just in warmth but in dizzy lightness, as if she were floating. And nothing mattered except Damon's closeness and the wonderful way he was looking at her.

"You're a contradictory little thing," he murmured, almost as if he were talking to himself. "You say that you're terrified—and I believe you—but when you've got something that's more frightened than you are to protect, you try to fight off certain death with a splintered stick."

He smiled faintly, just one corner of his mouth quirking up, and Bonnie realized with a thrill that it was a genuine smile, not the flashy one he put on for all sorts of reasons. This was just for her, and his eyes had gone soft and velvety for her, too.

Bonnie knew that her own lips were parted in astonishment, her breath coming lightly and quickly. She had never realized . . . but then she'd never really allowed herself to imagine this. It was all like some magical dream.

"You know," he said, very slowly and softly, as if he were puzzling out each word, "there are times when I think I've had enough of adventure, little redbird. When I just want to . . . come home. But . . . where is home, really? I wonder about that. Don't you think sometimes that it's nice to just relax . . . on your nest?"

A worry was nagging at Bonnie, trying to be born, but she pushed it away. She did her best to answer Damon's question. "I suppose so," she managed at last, hearing the quiver in her own soft voice. "I . . . I think . . ."

"Don't think," Damon murmured. "Redbird, don't think. Just . . . be."

He was holding her now, and his arms were strong and certain and a yearning joy told Bonnie that she never wanted him to let go. She felt her eyes drift shut, but at the same time, she could sense what Damon was doing. He was bending down to her, slowly, and then his lips touched hers, so softly, so gently that it was actually a shock of sweetness to all her senses. A throb of pure heavenly bliss pulsed through her body, dissolving her so that she was all softness, all gentleness as she kissed

him back. They were in perfect harmony, and they could never be out of tune. Bonnie was as captivated as a little mating songbird by the bright plumage and melody of her born nestmate.

For a long, long moment the kiss held and Bonnie couldn't think at all, but only feel and *be*. It was as if she were flying; there was a breathless rush and surge inside her and around her. She knew that this wondrous flight was changing her forever, that from now until eternity, she would always be a part of . . .

Wait! No! *Stop!*

Bonnie's nagging worry burst through the sweetness and the melody and flared red on the inside of her eyelids. It was as if the words themselves were dragging her back to a reality she didn't want to remember. She only wanted to—

Elena!

Oh, my God, Bonnie thought, no longer a little mating songbird, no longer flying, only falling. And the reality that she fell into filled her with horror.

She found that she was pushing at Damon; pushing hard at his chest with both hands. He was letting go of her but when his eyes opened, he looked at her with bewilderment and hurt.

His leather jacket slid off Bonnie's shoulders and fell to the ground. Neither Damon nor Bonnie took any notice of it, but when Bonnie felt the icy chill of the wind cut into her, she knew that she was back in reality, with her heart pounding violently.

Oh, God, God, God! she thought.

She couldn't stand for Damon to keep on looking at her the way he was, with open tenderness and hurt in his expression. She said the one word that would explain everything to him.

"Elena!"

Damon drew in his breath sharply. For an instant he just looked stunned, and then his whole demeanor changed. His eyes widened; he jerked upright as if he'd been struck a physical blow. He swallowed with a visible effort.

Bonnie's vision was blurred and she felt the first hot tears trickle down her cheeks. She was

overcome with shame and remorse.

“Oh,” she half-sobbed, “How could we? How could *you*?”

Damon looked rigid now. “How could I? But I’m . . . I’m completely powerless. It was you.” He shook his head in clear disbelief. “You actually influenced me . . .”

“What are you talking about?” Bonnie’s sobs were full-blown by this time, shaking her whole body. “What did *I* do? You started talking about how even though I was frightened I tried to fight off certain death with a stick. And then you put your jacket on me—”

Bonnie glanced down at the jacket but didn’t move to pick it up. However, as she looking in that direction she was jolted by the sight of the two bad dogs still crouching on the ground; their fierce eyes gleaming.

Damon seemed to see them in the same instant. He made a sound of impatience and then a gesture, as of casting something away.

“Leave it!” he cried. “Off! Go away! Whatever—just get out of here right now!”

He spoke as if the bad dogs could understand him. Maybe they did understand simple commands because with flattened ears and down-curved tails, they turned and began to lope away and no invisible wall stopped them. They ran, not along the concrete path, but into the darkness across the grass and toward a stand of tall trees. In seconds, they had melted into the night.

Bonnie watched, her heart still pounding. She felt frantic and frightened, and she knew that now there was nobody who could rescue her. She had betrayed her friend—her velociraptor sister—and she couldn’t understand how it had happened.

It wasn’t as if Elena didn’t know that Bonnie had feelings for Damon; Bonnie knew that. But Elena also knew that she could trust both Damon and Bonnie absolutely.

How could Bonnie have completely forgotten all that? How could she have done such a horrible thing?

It was so strange, but in those moments that she’d been held by Damon’s eyes, Bonnie had . . . had lost track of the connection between him and Elena. Insane as it sounded, Bonnie had somehow

thought of Elena as—taken care of. As if she'd broken up with Damon and was with . . . with . . .

With who? Bonnie demanded of her own mind. You don't even have someone to pretend about! You know that she wouldn't get back together with Matt. And . . . okay, so it feels as if there should be some other guy, someone perfect for her, someone who loves her desperately, but that's *Damon*, you idiot!

You and Meredith swore a blood oath that you would help her get Damon or die doing it. Back in the cemetery in Fell's Church, you swore it. You promised.

I *am* insane, Bonnie thought. I really, truly am. I say bizarre and terrible things I don't remember; I sleepwalk in the freezing cold; I try to steal my dearest friend's guy. And then I make up crazy excuses for my behavior.

Maybe it would have been better if Damon hadn't come to find me and rescue me. I swear! If those wild dogs had just . . . just come a minute earlier I would never have done such an awful thing. It's better to be dead than a crazy traitor! Isn't it? Isn't it?

"Now, redbir—now, Bonnie," Damon said from behind her, and Bonnie realized that she had her hands up over her face again and that she was sobbing quietly.

Maybe I said something terrible just now, she thought, and she didn't care because she was insane.

"Bonnie," Damon said again. "Come on." He was wrapping his jacket around her again, trying to tuck her arms into the armholes. Bonnie let him do it. Her arms hung down limply, and the jacket made her want to shudder. The leather of it smelled like Damon now to her. And the smell made her remember that one moment—a moment that had seemed to last forever—when his lips had touched hers.

"I'm insane," she got out, between hitching breaths. "I'm . . . I'm . . . *evil* . . ."

"Bonnie!" Now Damon sounded more than shocked. He turned her around and Bonnie was so surprised that she let him do that, too. "Of course you're not evil. And you're not insane, either."

"How can you say that after—"

“After what? That was just . . . it wasn’t what you think.”

Bonnie’s tears stopped out of sheer astonishment. She *knew* what that had been. That had been a complete, terrible, wonderful meeting of lips and souls. It had been a complete betrayal . . .

“No, it wasn’t,” Damon said, looking half exasperated and half . . . well, if she didn’t know better, she would think that it was still that tenderness that he had shown. And besides, how could he know what she was thinking?

“Everything you’re thinking shows in your face,” Damon said, looking as if his patience was being stretched. “But listen to me. Elena knows that I care about you. Of course I do. And she understands.” He fluffed Bonnie’s curls gently, almost as if he were affectionately mussing her hair. “And just for a moment, I was so glad to see you that—well, it was an impulse.” He shrugged. “We all have impulses. This time, maybe it wasn’t such a good call. But it doesn’t change how I feel about Elena. And Elena knows that—although I think it would be better if we both just forgot about it. I think you think the same thing. That we both should just forget it, yes?”

Bonnie’s breath caught in her throat again, but this time it was a different kind of wonder that had snatched the air from her lungs. It was amazement that Damon could be so casual, so—so brazen! And how dare he tell her what *she* thought? All she wanted was to run to Elena and bury her head in Elena’s lap and cry and beg Elena’s forgiveness. How could he imagine that she would . . . that she would want to . . . pretend to forget . . .

Bonnie blinked as Damon seemed to fade in and out of focus. Ohhh . . . She felt dizzy. Really dizzy.

“Damon?”

He just watched her. She had to admit . . . he didn’t look brazen. More as if he were in pain. His face looked very pale suddenly.

Was he taking on the whole burden of what had just happened? That must be it. *He* was going to tell Elena, because he wanted to help Bonnie, to make it easy for her. That was why he was saying “Forget.” He really meant . . . don’t mention it.

Suddenly everything that had just happened seemed oddly blurred in Bonnie's mind, as if it were made out of ice cream that was rapidly melting. It was . . . becoming formless.

This must be just another kind of insanity. But, honestly, whether Bonnie wanted to forget or not, the memories seemed to be going. That was . . . a little sad, although she knew that thinking so was wicked. Bonnie watched her heavenly little moment shrink away into . . . oh, God, she was tired . . . into nothingness . . .

With a start, Bonnie lifted her head. She was wearing Damon's jacket, which smelled strangely like sadness. Damon was holding her in a very gentle and fraternal embrace.

“. . . feeling better now?” he was saying.

Bonnie sniffed. Her nose was running. She sniffed harder, not wanting it to run on Damon's clothes. She'd been crying, for some reason. There were tears on her cheeks, drying chilly in the night air.

“I'm sorry,” she said automatically. “What—what just happened?”

“Well, you either grayed out or you started to go to sleep again,” Damon said. “I just chased those bad dogs away.”

To sleep . . . again! That's right! Oh, my God, Bonnie thought. I've been sleepwalking. And those bad dogs came after me and the big white dog!

Just as she thought this, she became aware of a low sound—so deep it was almost beyond her range of hearing. It was a growl, and it was coming from her friend, the big white dog who was standing beside her.

The big white dog was growling at Damon.

“Oh, good grief,” Bonnie said, suddenly feeling her spirits lift. It was clear that after seeing that the bad dogs were gone, the white dog had suddenly gained the courage to threaten *someone*.

For a good boy, he had a fairly vicious growl.

“Stop it!” Bonnie said sharply. “Damon isn't trying to hurt me! Honestly!”

The white dog subsided, but his golden eyes seemed to watch Damon with disapproval. It

made Bonnie want to laugh. But she also felt drowsy. Sleepy . . .

Damon gave her a little shake. “Look, Bonnie, what on earth is going on? You’re running around in the wee hours in your nightie!”

“I know,” Bonnie blurted. “And this here is the most cowardly dog in the world! He hid behind me—oh, but Damon, thank you for making those bad dogs go away! They were going to attack me and this dog here! And, and, and—”

“Easy. Easy, redbird. Don’t try to talk now. Your feet must be freezing.” Damon picked her up and turned to walk back down the concrete path toward Soto Hall. Bonnie clung to his neck with one arm and tried to cover her feet with her nightgown with the other. The white dog followed them watchfully.

Bonnie was vaguely surprised that she wasn’t crying hysterically. Maybe she had been hysterical before she had—grayed out—and Damon was just too nice to mention it. That would be like him. He was always kind to her.

Weird how far away the attack of the feral dogs seemed now. Weirder, because she couldn’t remember anything after it except seeing them run away.

“How—how did you know where to find me?” she asked, feeling lost.

“I didn’t. I’m not the only one out looking for you. I got lucky and found you—just in time.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Bonnie said sincerely.

She buried her face in Damon’s shoulder, feeling her shivering slow down. The problem came when they reached the side door of her dormitory.

“Come on,” Bonnie said, unburying herself. She made clicking noises with her tongue, all the time watching the big white dog. “Good boy, come on in!”

“Steady on there. Bonnie, you can’t bring a—an animal that size inside. You know that!”

“But you don’t understand—he helped me—I was so scared, but then *he* was so scared. He’s *my* dog, now. He’s a good—”

“Bonnie, you can’t keep a pet in college. Oh, well, maybe a hamster. But not an enormous

white dog.”

“He’s an Alaskan Husky. I know because my cousin had one. And I *want* him.” Irrationally, Bonnie felt tears come, leaking out of her eyes and tracing their way down her cheeks. “I’m going to name him and feed him . . . and besides, where’s he going to go if I don’t take care of him?”

“He can take care of himself. Does he look as if he’s ever missed a meal in his life?”

Bonnie, gazing at the white dog’s furry, healthy body, had to admit that he didn’t look like a stray.

“He doesn’t even have a collar—”

“No, and I doubt he’d be grateful if you put one on him. Bonnie, you *know* you can’t keep him, don’t you?”

More tears spilled. Bonnie reached out toward the animal and Damon let her down so that she could put her arms around it.

“I’m sorry, but you have to go away now,” she whispered. “He says I can’t keep you. Maybe someday I’ll see you again. You’re a good boy.”

The white dog, heavy and warm and solid in her arms, nosed her curls for a moment and then gave her a giant lick right in the middle of the face.

“Oh, yuck!” It made Bonnie stop crying and giggle. “Good boy,” she said one last time, and wiped her face on her sleeve.

She took a deep breath and then allowed Damon to guide her into the dorm in front of him. The door shut behind them and Bonnie’s heart ached when she thought that the white dog might be staring at it in bewilderment, wondering why he wasn’t allowed to follow them.

She choked up again and had to keep blinking away tears as Damon escorted her up to the second floor where she and Meredith shared a room near Elena.

Time to face the music, she told herself. At least it distracted her from the pain in her heart.

Damon didn’t go all the way to her room, though. He stopped at Elena’s door and knocked three times, paused, and then knocked three more times.

The door opened to reveal Elena, mobile in hand, breaking off a sentence with an exclamation of: “Bonnie! Oh, thank God!” And then, while hugging Bonnie fiercely: “It’s all right, Matt; Damon found her. She feels freezing cold, but she looks okay.”

Behind Elena, Meredith was also on her mobile. “Jim, Damon just brought her inside. She’s fine. Oh, Lord; I’m so sorry to have bothered you, but thank you so much for searching!”

Caroline was in the armchair, hands clasped over her stomach. “Where were you?” she asked bluntly, eyeing Bonnie’s nightgown.

By that time Meredith was hugging Bonnie even more fiercely than Elena had.

“Bonnie, how *could* you? We’ve been going crazy looking for you!”

“I sleepwalked,” Bonnie said, embarrassed and defensive. “I woke up at Lerner Hall.”

“The night after we discover you need constant protection you begin to sleepwalk?” Elena asked, looking from Bonnie to Damon in consternation.

“Why Lerner Hall?” Meredith asked at almost the same instant.

“Are you sure you’re not just doing it for attention?” Caroline said, as coolly as if it were an ordinary question.

“We woke Caroline up accidentally,” Elena explained under her breath. “When Meredith saw that you were gone, Damon asked her to come over to stay with me, while he went out to look for you. All the noise woke her up.” Caroline’s room was between Elena’s and Bonnie and Meredith’s.

“I wasn’t asleep,” Caroline said in a voice which indicated she had said it more than once.

“And then Meredith and I called Matt and Jim Bryce and got them out looking for you, too,” Elena said. “We—well, we were terrified, really. We thought you might end up like that girl in Heron.”

Bonnie, still flushed with embarrassment, felt that she had a lot of explaining to do. She did her best to convey everything that had happened—and then had to backtrack when a series of knocks came at the door and a blinking, rumpled Matt was allowed in. When she got to the part about the bad dogs coming toward her, however, she saw Elena and Meredith and Damon exchanging glances like

adults listening to a child tell about a dream.

“What?” she demanded. “Why don’t you believe me?”

Meredith said gently: “Bonnie—wild dogs? Here on campus?”

“I suppose,” Matt said, “that the campus kind of backs up onto forestland, but still . . . I never heard of wild dogs living in Dyer Wood.”

Elena was still looking at Damon, and Bonnie realized that he was looking uncomfortable.

“Maybe,” Elena said slowly, still looking at Damon, “you just dreamed the parts about the dogs, too—all three of them. Maybe you thought you were awake then, but you were really still asleep.”

“But I *wasn’t* asleep! I was too *cold* to be asleep! And Damon saw the white dog, didn’t you, Damon?”

Damon was pinching the bridge of his nose. “Oh, yes. She said it was an Alaskan Husky. I wouldn’t know, but it was damn big and white all over.”

“It had beautiful golden eyes,” Bonnie contributed. “It didn’t wag much; and it was afraid of the bad dogs.”

“These bad dogs—” Matt began.

“They were ginormous. More Alaskan Huskies, but they were brindled on top and only white on their stomachs—”

“Brindled . . . like a wolf?”

Everyone stopped talking and looked at Matt.

“People were always breeding wolf-dog hybrids back in Fell’s Church. They thought it was cool—but then after the puppies grew up, they dumped them around the Old Wood. I’ll bet that people do it around Dyer Wood, too,” Matt said, thinking it out.

“*Wolf-dogs?*” Meredith asked skeptically. “Wild ones?”

“And maybe Bonnie’s white dog, too. They might even run wild in a pack somewhere in Dyer Wood.”

“But—that’s impossible!” Caroline said, her voice tight. “There may be coyotes around here, but there aren’t any—”

She broke off, seeming uncomfortable. Matt just plunged on: “They’re way more vicious than dogs or wolves are. They might even track a human—especially if she was with the lowest-ranking member of their pack.”

Bonnie felt injured. “Why the lowest-ranking? He was just scared, and so was I. Does that make *me* the lowest ranking girl in our—”

“Animals that are all white or all black are often discriminated against—in packs in the wild,” Meredith said in her explaining-from-a-book voice. “But, Matt, do you really think a pack of wild wolf-dogs is roaming the Dalcrest campus?”

“They might be hanging out in the woods,” Damon said. He had a way of speaking that made everyone stop and wait for him to say more. “They might even have kicked the white dog out of their pack . . . and then followed him with unfriendly intentions when he went to hide on the campus where big blundering humans live.”

“But you didn’t let me keep him!” Bonnie wailed, turning toward Damon. Now she was really upset. “They’ll eat him or something! I could have saved him!”

Damon, looking somber, just shook his head. “Redbird, you can’t keep an enormous, untamed, unneutered dog in your room. It’s not fair to him, and eventually you’d get expelled.”

“Rusticated,” Elena began, and then fell silent, frowning. “Rusticated . . . sounds familiar somehow,” she murmured, shaking her head.

“But I have to protect him! I’m going back right now and getting him—”

“You’re not going anywhere in your nightgown and bare feet!”—Meredith.

“You can’t keep a wolf-dog in a dorm room!”—Caroline.

“You’re not going anywhere without protection for yourself!”—Elena.

“The dog or hybrid or whatever is already gone—I’m sure.” That was Damon, seeming perfectly serious, looking perfectly competent. “He ran away at the sight of Indoors. That’s not

where he wants to be.”

Everyone nodded at this, and Bonnie knew that they would all take his word for it; because he was a junior and they were freshmen, because he had traveled, and they hadn’t; because he could deal with the bitch queen on wheels that Elena could be sometimes, and nobody else could. And because of a whole different reason *that she couldn’t even think of right now*.

The unfairness of this made her so angry that she said, while more or less in her right mind: “Maybe he ran away when he saw *you*. You were the one who said that ‘damon’ meant run away in every language. He growled at you. If he did run, maybe he ran away because you were so *mean!*”

Everyone turned to stare at Bonnie in silence. She realized she’d confounded them. Tears pooled in her eyes, but she didn’t care. Her heart was beating fiercely.

Damon looked less confounded than the others. He did look hurt, though, and very tired.

“Little redbird—”

“I’m not your little red bird!” Bonnie cried through the sting of tears, burning her bridges behind her. She had no idea why she was saying all this, but she felt betrayed and unhappy, and . . . and fuming mad. She felt even more betrayed and miserable and angry than the loss of the beautiful white dog would seem to justify. And because she couldn’t fight with her muscles; she had to use words.

“You’re Elena’s boyfriend; you shouldn’t even be calling me that! And it’s not your job to protect me! It’s none of your *business!*”

“It’s my business if you go out there again tonight and freeze,” Damon said. Something inside Bonnie noted that he looked harried and pale, but another, more selfish thing noted that his voice was almost harsh—and he had almost never before been harsh toward her. “In fact, I will make it my very own personal business if you even try to do that.”

“And it’s my business, period, because I’m the one who would have to live with the ginormous mangy, flea-bitten, wild wolf-dog if you did find him,” Meredith said flatly. Bonnie couldn’t believe that she was siding with Damon, especially when he was being so . . . *mean!*

He didn't even look *right*, Bonnie thought wretchedly. His eyes looked too dark. Not a bit like spring leaves—but then why should he have green eyes like Caroline? That was a weird idea. She didn't know any guy with vivid green eyes.

Meanwhile, her mouth was saying to Meredith, “He wasn't mangy or flea-bitten! He was gorgeous! And he was there with me when I woke up—and when *you* disappeared!”

“Bonnie, that's cra—that's unreasonable thinking!” Meredith flashed back.

Bonnie knew it was unreasonable. She couldn't help it. If she was going crazy anyway, and everybody knew it, why should she even try to be reasonable?

“Okay,” Elena said in her clearing-away-obstacles-in-one-fell-swoop voice. “We're all tired. We're all on edge. We all need a little time to cool down—”

“I'm already cold enough, and so is your boyfriend!” Bonnie snapped, feeling as if she were drowning in a bitter, salty sea. “He's as cold as—ice! He doesn't even care about a poor, scared dog that's outside getting frozen—”

“He's an Alaskan Husky—or a wolf-dog,” Damon said. “They've both got coats that let them sleep on glaciers! I don't think a little October Virginia weather is going to freeze him. Even if it *snowed* on him, he—”

“You're going to *make* it snow on him! Don't make it snow on him!” Bonnie cried, bursting into all-encompassing sobs. Even as she heard the words she realized that she must be having one of her psycho trances, where she said peculiar things without knowing it. Weird that this time she was aware of speaking.

Damon made a gesture of flinging out his hands and looking pointedly for other-worldly intervention. Instead of rolling his eyes upward, however, he looked sideways, toward the wall with the large wooden turquoise and gold letter E. Matt, Caroline and Meredith glanced back and forth between the wall, Damon, Elena, and Bonnie. Eventually, though, they all focused on Bonnie, maybe because Elena had never taken her eyes off her.

Matt ran his hands through his hair, making it stick up even higher on one side. He wet his

lips. “She’s . . .”

“Yeah,” Meredith said.

“*No*,” Elena corrected. “She isn’t having an episode. She’s scared to death, is all. And I don’t think I feel well, either.” She massaged her forehead with both hands, then began rubbing her closed eyes with her palms. “Bonnie? Why . . . do you think that Damon can . . . *damn* it! . . . make it snow?”

Bonnie was surprised into trying to stop her sobbing, although she couldn’t really, not on full flow like that. Hearing Elena say that she, Bonnie, was scared to death, made Bonnie feel even more frightened. Having Elena ask her a question with no sensible answer was even worse, because Bonnie knew Elena and Elena was in earnest.

“I didn’t mean it,” Bonnie said feebly, still crying.

“Of course you meant it. But why?” Elena’s hand beat on the air, softly impatient.

“Yes,” Damon said suddenly, his voice grim. “Look at me, Bonnie. Can I make it snow? Look *hard*.”

Something deep inside Bonnie unfurled and looked. It stared at Damon and all around him and came back with a shocking report.

“No,” Bonnie said, surprised that she was shocked. “You’re totally . . . you don’t even have any . . .”

“Can *you* make it snow?” Damon persisted, still grim, watching her narrowly.

“*Me*? Of course not.”

“All right, then. Did I have anything to do with the attack on Elena? I mean, that’s what Elena really wants to know. Isn’t it, princess?”

Bonnie hiccupped. She was too shocked now to keep crying. “Of course you didn’t! You . . . no! Anyone could tell that.”

Elena nodded at Bonnie and then turned to Damon. “Okay. Fine. I’m still going to hit you, though, because I dreamed that you did it.”

“You dreamed that I did it,” Damon echoed, sounding as if nothing would surprise him anymore. “Bonnie sleepwalks and you dream that . . . I mean, *how*? With a giant straw? No, on second thought, don’t answer that.”

“Can everybody just stop being so . . . bizarre? Just for a few minutes?” Meredith pleaded.

“Some of us are crazy,” Bonnie said darkly.

“And some of us are dreamers,” Elena said, at her most mysterious and deliberately obstinate.

“Yeah, and some of us are a purple duck, or a mountainside, or a quarter after three,” Matt contributed, brightening suddenly.

“Is it that late?” Caroline asked, frowning.

“It’s *Hans Christian Andersen*.”

“I thought it was an *ugly* duckling,” Damon muttered. “Purple—wouldn’t it end up a slightly effeminate lavender swan?”

“Why is it that saying a woman is like a man is usually positive, while calling *anything* masculine feminine is the kiss of death?” Elena burst out.

“Just . . . just could everybody stop before someone starts asking why a raven is like a writing desk, and I have a complete nervous *breakdown*,” Meredith said, with an intensity that was unlike her.

“Oh!” Elena said. “A raven—not a raven! No, no, no, no—”

“I believe you mean ‘nevermore,’” Damon said, distantly polite now, watching something that no one else could see the way lions in the savanna watch waterholes.

“No, I *didn’t* mean ‘nevermore.’ I meant—”

“Well, why *is* a raven like a—” Caroline began simultaneously.

“Because Poe wrote on both,” Meredith said, dangerously quietly. “Or maybe because the notes for which they are noted are not noted for being musical notes. That’s not the question. The question is why everybody has freaking *lost their minds*.”

“Elena and I aren’t big enough to be everybody,” Bonnie offered absently, thinking about the

white dog whimpering as he slept on a glacier.

“Who *is* big enough to be everybody?” Caroline demanded, stiffening. “Are you implying—”

“You know, raven is ‘nevar’ backwards,” Matt interrupted.

“It’s not just you and Elena,” Meredith said to Bonnie. “I think *he*’s asleep, too, Matt is. You are all freaking *raving*.”

“And by the way, you made me *forget*,” Elena said to Meredith. “I almost had something, but then you went and—”

“And you’re *not* raving?” Bonnie asked Meredith as courteously as possible.

“Am I invisible and inaudible?” Caroline demanded of Bonnie with no courtesy at all.

“Because my questions keep getting—”

“SHUT UP. ALL OF YOU. RIGHT NOW.”

Silence.

Bonnie looked at Elena. Elena was looking at Damon. Damon was looking at the doorway.

Bonnie turned to see who was there and fell fast asleep.

* * *

Stefan pulled his sweater, which had been hiding most of his face, down and stared at Damon. There were bits of ragged leaves in his hair, Damon noted. Not big ones, but still. He knew that *he* had never looked as if he was living in a tree, but then his little brother had all that wavy, unmanageable hair. He also probably didn’t carry a small comb along with a silver-edged switchblade in his jeans pocket.

Stefan was already ranting. “*Che diavolo pensi di fare? Sei pazzo? Guarda tutti questi matti! Hai completamente rovinato tutto quello che ho fatto io, idiota! Lo sapevo che non potevo fidarmi di te, deficiente pigro, senza cervello e inaffidabile!*”

There was a pause. Even vampires had to breathe to speak. Damon waited it out, and after a moment raised his eyebrows and tilted his head as if to say, “That’s all you’ve got?”

Stefan opened his mouth as if to continue, but this time Damon jumped in. “*Stai zitto bestia!*

In primo luogo, tu gridi come una ragazzina di sei anni. E poi, mezza sega, stupido come un asino ma infuocato come i demoni dell'inferno! Terzo. . .

“Third”—he switched to English—“I’m going to tell you what’s wrong with everything you’re thinking. The most important thing is that I didn’t *need* to screw everything up. You already did that very efficiently yourself. I’ll explain more later. For now watch these humans; keep them frozen that way for fifteen minutes.”

“Why? You—”

“A, because they’re your responsibility; and, Two, *because I am starving*. Ye gods, I had to Influence Elena and Bonnie *both* by burning life energy! Right now, I’m going to find something soft and warm and I’m going to feed. You can either go to hell or watch over the people whose lives you’ve ruined; your choice.”

Stefan looked mutinous. “Your noise woke me up when I’d finally just gotten to sleep, and now I find—”

“I did not make noise. Scan me. I can hardly stand up and I couldn’t wake a flea. *I’ve been trying to keep Elena safe . . .*” Damon broke off. “Fifteen minutes.”

“Ten.”

“Don’t you try to bargain with me, *cazzo!* I’m the only thing standing between this lot of humans and bedlam.”

Without waiting for Stefan to frame a response, he turned and hastened out of the room. Once the door was shut behind him, his famished senses took him prowling down the hallway as if blown by a hot wind. He barely had the Power to see auras but a vivid one about seven rooms down was brilliant enough to attract him like a bee to a sweetly scented, pollen-loaded rose.

The nice thing about the dormitories was that one invitation into the building sufficed for every room that had been part of the same construction. In other words, Damon didn’t have to wake his newest best friend with the dazzling aura to get permission to enter her room.

Two minutes later, he was slaking his thirst from the throat of a girl with soft mouse-brown

hair and a pair of glasses on her nightstand. Damon thought she was as beautiful as a half-open Jacqueminot rose. He'd given her one of his most charming dreams too; if she remembered it in the morning, she'd be surprised at how much she knew about Renaissance Florence.

He raised his head when ten minutes had gone by. Of course, he might delight Stefan's heart by appearing early, but . . . it was such a wonderful idea, this roommate business. Just two steps away was another sleeping girl: bonier, more angular, more conventionally beautiful, but less cuddly and with only half the aura of his sweet-smelling rose, who, incidentally, was now smiling as she slept. Damon eyed the roommate thoughtfully.

Oh, what the hell?

* * *

Stefan's cold anger had melted as soon as Damon left the room. Now he was standing where he thought he would never stand again, directly in front of Elena, looking into her eyes. The problem was that those eyes were open but unseeing. He could see the flecks of gold in the dark blue, steady as the inclusions in a piece of lapis lazuli since she was simply staring without blinking.

That worried him suddenly. He'd held more people than this frozen at Mercy Havenwick ICU, but he hadn't wondered if they were able to blink. There was probably something bad that could happen if you stared for fifteen minutes—twenty more likely, if he knew his brother—without blinking.

Stefan tossed out a tendril of Influence and everyone: Elena, Meredith, Bonnie, Matt, and Caroline all blinked at once. Then they all shut their eyes, as Stefan had an inspiration.

He focused on Elena again. It wasn't so bad to watch her standing still when her eyes were shut. He had marveled over Elena asleep often enough that this didn't seem unnatural.

It was dangerous, though. Looking led to the desire to touch. He only wanted to trace the curve of her cheek with one finger, he bargained. Just that—and perhaps to kiss her warm lips.

Madness. He wasn't stupid enough to start a domino effect like that. This was a hunger that grew when you fed it. That was Shakespeare, wasn't it? "But she makes hungry, where she most

satisfies . . .” Antony and Cleopatra. Oh, right. Hamlet, too. “As if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on . . .”

He was dully surprised at how much he missed her already. Images and sensations whirled through his mind: moments that they’d shared; the flash of her eyes as she glanced back at him, pointing out a joke that no one else besides Stefan could comprehend; the taste of rusty iron when she kissed him after holding a mouthful of nails; her expression as tears traced white paths on her dusty, sweaty face when she was mourning Damon’s death; the way her hair whipped into a thousand priceless silk snakes in the wind. The warmth of her lissome body when they slept curled together, and—even more delicious than that—the knowledge that she trusted him absolutely to take no liberty with her while she was at her most vulnerable.

That was what had been ineffably precious: her faith in his love for her. Each time they had embraced had been a unique encounter; each had been a distinct and separate paradise. She had slain him with a thousand butterfly kisses; resurrected him with the swift arch of her throat. Afterward, with their souls still joined mysteriously through the gift of her blood, joy had dizzied him until he trembled when she’d held him with his cheek against the softness of her silk-clad breast. How could a creature be so yielding, so yearningly tender and yet have the fierce and questing spirit of a medieval knight?

Automatically, Stefan put one hand to his throat and touched the talisman hanging there: Elena’s lapis ring, long abandoned, and—even longer abandoned—the apricot ribbon that had once bound her hair.

He realized suddenly that he had his eyes tightly shut in sheer emotional pain. He opened them while trying to keep his jaw and chin stiff, afraid that his mouth would begin to tremble

He had just decided on how to settle the desperate question of how to kiss Elena without actually kissing her, when the door opened. Stefan instinctively tried to freeze in place the person entering and got a withering look from Damon

“Done pawing her?” Damon asked, after deliberately turning away and making a show of not

watching.

“Yes,” Stefan said emptily. He’d thought of kissing his fingers and then pressing them—gently—to Elena’s lips, but of course he couldn’t do anything of the kind while Damon was here.

“I don’t suppose,” Damon said dourly, “that you used any of the time I was gone in re-Influencing them—or even *her*?”

Stefan was startled into staring at his brother. He answered the sentiment beneath the question.

“How can you be jealous of me?” he breathed. “I have nothing, and you have everything.”

Damon had found a wall to lounge against, while examining Bonnie with narrowed eyes. “Oh, yes? Let me tell you about this everything I have. Do you know about salmon, little brother? No, I’m not crazy—I remain an entire millimeter away from insanity. Just shut up and listen.”

Stefan shut up. He wondered how many girls Damon had got to while he himself had been sentimentalizing over Elena, and whether his older brother had even taken the basic precaution of walking upstairs a floor to keep Elena’s immediate neighbors from getting suspicious.

“Salmon,” Damon said, with every indication of being fascinated, “are curious creatures. They’re born in rivers, but early on they swim out to sea and there in the ocean they grow up—if they’re not eaten first. But then one day when they’re mature and ready to be mommy and daddy salmon, they just turn around and swim back to the rivers to spawn. And the thing is that they usually manage to find—with *eerie* precision, yes?—not just the river, but the actual spawning ground where they were born.”

“And the bit of this that every kindergartner doesn’t know is?”

“They home, salmon do. Just like pigeons. And so do your friends. Your coterie is *homing*. Bonnie’s not just trancing; she’s getting flashes of who I really am—and how I’m different from you. I think she can see auras. It was pure dumb luck that I was starving and didn’t *have* an aura when she took a good look at me a little while ago. In fact, earlier, while she was sleepwalking—well, never mind that. But she’s definitely being uncanny.”

Stefan was shocked. He'd known that things were going wrong tonight; of course; that was why he'd left his tree and come to investigate the chaos he'd sensed around Elena. But Bonnie shouldn't be regaining her witch powers with anything like the speed Damon had described.

“What do you mean ‘while she was sleepwalking?’ Where did she go?”

“To her morning class, I believe—and I said, never mind about that. Elena's even worse than Bonnie. She more or less called me out on not being human before we went to bed. I didn't have enough Power to Influence her—and before you ask why, it's because I couldn't leave her to feed, right?—until I burned life energy and even then what did she do? She apparently had an inspired dream—*in somnis veritas*—in which she decided that *I* somehow made her missing blood disappear.”

“But you didn't!”

“Which was just as well, because Bonnie was able to sense the truth about *that*, too. Meanwhile, Meredith is going crazy for lack of kata to do—”

“Of who?”

“Her aikido and judo exercises—although I think for judo you need another person to practice with. Plus, probably half a dozen other martial arts forms that I don't know the names of. Anyway, she's going loony trying to make sense of the other loons. And Matt can't remember a single reason to actually trust me, which puts him more than a millimeter on the wrong side of sanity. He's started just making random remarks about crazy things.”

Stefan didn't ask about Caroline. Caroline knew the truth about herself, in any case. Caroline would look after Caroline.

“And *why* is this all happening?” Damon continued relentlessly. “Because *you* didn't give them enough of a reality to believe in. You took away their identities, but you didn't give them anything new to identify with. Also possibly because you relied on a neuro-virus rather than doing all the work by hand.”

“I didn't have time—” Stefan began, but then he stopped and shook his head. “I couldn't stand

to make time,” he said slowly. “I didn’t want to see them—watch their eyes—while I was taking their memories away.”

“Well, they all have their eyes shut now,” Damon said, with a grim shadow of his most glorious smile. “And you and I are going to finish what you started. But first, since you’ve been holding them all frozen for this long, you’re going to go out and find yourself a nice girl and settle down for about a quarter of an hour.”

It took Stefan several seconds to interpret this. By the time he was finished he was barely even angry anymore. Exasperated, however: yes.

“I know this is difficult for you to understand,” he told Damon. “And I can explain it *to* you, but I can’t comprehend it *for* you. Not feeding on humans is more than just a quirk. It is an ethical decision I made *half a millennium ago*. Not feeding on unconscious, un-consenting donors is a choice that I would still hold to if I were dying—”

“Blah, blah, blah, yes, and in your spare time you cast out devilled ham and walk on watercress.” Damon yawned like the sleek and well-fed predator he was. “But you’ve been holding all of these people frozen for a long time and you need to be realistic—” He broke off.

Stefan was smiling, shaking his head. He allowed himself the luxury of several seconds of this, which was all the time Damon was prepared to give him before physically attacking.

“They’re not frozen,” he said just as Damon went from utter relaxation to a bundle of coiled potential energy. “They’re asleep. It’s nighttime, and they’re not at a hospital in the middle of a huge crisis, and I haven’t been alarming them by meddling with their memories. I just put them to sleep on their feet.”

Damon’s muscles uncoiled slowly, like a cobra flaring out its hood—a position which kept it from striking. He still radiated menace, but at least the physical threat was over.

“Well, you’re going to have to meddle now,” Damon said. “What have you got?”

Stefan let his full aura loose around him, undiminished since he’d caught the twelve-point red-brown buck. He hadn’t needed to use Power to spy on Elena and her friends; they’d been projecting

so loudly that he'd worried the forest werewolves might decide to investigate.

Damon raised his eyebrows a fraction. Stefan knew that he didn't entirely believe that such Power could come from an animal, but there was no question that it was enough. Stefan reined it in to forestall Damon's otherwise inevitable demonstration of how his own newly-acquired store of Power was greater.

"All right," Damon said. "We get to work. We need them to understand that there are no such things as auras; that I have no supernatural powers; that I am above suspicion. Besides which, Matt needs to have a dozen memories of why he trusts me, and Meredith needs to know that she's a fitness nut. You see? For all that you've taken, we give a little back to each of them."

Stefan thought that it all sounded depressingly like foul play. But who was he to judge? Damon was right: Elena and Bonnie were on the brink of madness already. And they . . .

"And they need the most work of all," Damon said, without apologizing for hijacking Stefan's thoughts. "Bonnie needs to stop obsessing over any of her witch powers that may appear within the next few days. She has to be convinced she's not going insane. And finally," he muttered half under his breath, "she has to give up the idea that she's keeping a big white dog for a pet."

Stefan was too intently focused on his own thoughts to ask questions. He was gazing at Elena; at the pulse that beat in her soft, slim throat. He felt ill at the notion of invading her mind again.

"And . . . Elena?" he got out.

"Elena needs to be more logical and less intuitive. She needs to forget whatever she dreamed tonight, and to know I had nothing to do with her blood loss. She needs to remember—with specific incidents—some good days spent with me as her boyfriend. She also has to accept that I'm sleeping on her bed, and that she has no objection to me moving in. She has to know that although she may not be keeping to the letter of her word to her Aunt Judith, she's still keeping to the spirit. That's all."

"Oh, that's *all*, is it? And you imagine that *I'm* going to persuade her of that little list?"

Damon flashed him a chilling smile. "No, I'll do it, if you prefer. I'm already taking care of Bonnie. You may work on Matt and Meredith."

* * *

The new Influencing was done, although it had required both Stefan's effort and Damon's assistance to fine-tune Elena's fond "memories" of days she and Damon had spent together as the seasons had turned.

Stefan had at last gone back to Dyer Wood, tired and with only a quarter of the aura he'd had when he arrived. Damon privately predicted that he would be hunting white-tailed deer in this new forest before dawn.

All the humans but Elena had departed, befuddled by sleep, to their own rooms.

In the sweet darkness of the last hours of night, Damon settled down in bed. He was holding the newly-Influenced Elena's hand, was bathed in the warm radiance of Elena's aura. He put up wards about the perimeter of Soto hall, to ensure that if anyone who didn't have business in the dormitory was sniffing around the entryway, windows, or exits of the building they would trip an eldritch wire and he Damon, would be wakened out of the soundest sleep.

Then he settled his head on the pillow. In just minutes, he had fallen asleep.

Damon dreamed.

* * *

He was paralyzed and covered with ash: ash and tiny droplets of Power. However, the Power didn't seem to be enough to allow him movement except in one hand, and that hand was weak; its movements restricted.

Damon slept and woke and slept again. Even with the huge stake no longer pushing him into both intolerable agony and true extinction, the wooden fibers that had spread from his circulatory system to his nerve and muscle cells were trying to make his body a seedbed for a new great Tree. The droplets of Power that slowly soaked into his skin only sufficed to keep the fibers from accomplishing their purpose. Perhaps in time enough drops would accumulate to kill the wooden fibers off completely, but Damon was somehow certain that even this would not allow him to get up and walk around freely. He would need . . . some kind of help from outside to drag him back from the

shadowy world of death that was all he could perceive around him. Some sort of, ah, *jump-start*.

Meanwhile, he was bored. The shadowy world of near-death was incredibly dull. Lying and clenching his left hand into a fist over and over, Damon tried to keep himself from watching events in his life parade over the inner movie screen of his mind's eye. He felt that introspection right now would only lead to him slipping into depression and a darkness from which there was no return.

Eventually, he struck on the idea to ask the Power to do something different. He had been wondering what was happening with Elena and Bonnie and Stefan and Sage. Were they even alive?

To his astonishment, when he thought about them, it seemed that he could see them. He could see the gold of Elena's hair. If he concentrated, he could even see out of her lapis lazuli eyes, and hear what was going on in that convoluted mind of hers.

Elena was grieving.

It wasn't as if the Celestial Court hadn't done all that it had promised. Fell's Church was restored. There wasn't a possessed girl or a malach in sight. Houses which had been burned to the ground by children acting under evil influences were whole again—and nobody remembered a damned thing about the holocaust which had swept through the town.

On top of which, Elena had been given a second chance to live her life as an ordinary human. She ought to have been ecstatic over that.

But she couldn't do more than summon up a quivering, watery smile.

Damon was dead. He was gone; his soul diffused into nothingness. Vampires didn't go to the Dark Dimension when they died. They certainly didn't go to the Celestial Court. They just . . . went out.

She would never see him again.

The first thing she did on the day she woke up and realized all this was to call Bonnie's mobile. When no one answered she called Bonnie's mother, who told her that Bonnie was home, but sick in bed.

Elena knew what kind of sickness it was. It was grief and guilt and fear. Bonnie held herself

responsible for what had happened to Damon.

“Just give her the phone for one moment,” she said. And when Bonnie was listening, she said quickly, “I’m going to Mrs. Flowers’s house. I want to know what *Mama* and Grandmama have to say about Damon’s soul.”

Bonnie said in a whisper that was hoarse and choked with repressed emotion, “Take me, too! Please?”

When Elena picked her up, Bonnie’s small face was piteous, marred with hours of weeping in the night. Elena blinked back her own tears as she drove to Mrs. Flowers’ house. Together, they had raised their hands to knock at the door, and together they had started as the door opened before they could touch it.

“Mrs. Flowers,” Elena began, only to be met by a quick and cheerful voice saying,

“Tea? It’s peppermint and lemongrass. Good for enhancing psychic abilities. And I imagine we’ll need plenty of those today.”

“Mrs. Flowers, we’ve come—”

“Yes, yes. I know. What else could it be? Bonnie, I’ve got a cold rosewater compress for your eyes. Just hold it on while you drink your tea.”

The tea cleared Elena’s sinuses and her brain both. “Isn’t Stefan up yet?” she asked, feeling a little ripple of alarm. Normally, Stefan would have come downstairs at the sound of her car approaching the house, even if he couldn’t make out her aura from a distance any longer.

“Up and gone before dawn,” Mrs. Flowers said succinctly. “He went to—well, what used to be the Old Wood.”

“Hunting?”

“I wasn’t able to ask him, dear. I wouldn’t fret over it, though. Sometimes young male creatures just have to be out on their own. When they’ve experienced a loss . . .” Mrs. Flowers let the sentence trail off discreetly.

Elena drank the last of her tea, her mind whirling. She was trying to figure out what it would

take for Stefan to stay in the Old Wood after hunting, knowing all the time that she and Bonnie would be devastated with grief today.

Devastated . . . but not prostrated.

Stefan wasn't stupid. He'd know what Elena would do today. This morning. As soon as she woke up. And he probably knew that she'd bring Bonnie with her.

He was giving her space; grieving alone so that she could speak to Mrs. Flowers without embarrassment.

"So . . . why have we come this morning?" she asked the white-haired woman carefully.

"To find out what I've been trying to find out since late last night. Whether a certain poor vampire's soul is drifting through the æther, or reincarnated, or if it has . . . simply disappeared."

Elena's heart sank. "None of those possibilities sound like very good ones."

"Well, we shall see, we shall see. I've already spoken to dear *Mama* about this and she said, 'Let the young witch try her hand at dowsing with a crystal pendulum.'"

Bonnie took the rosewater compress off her face. Her eyes were much less swollen, Elena noted. "I thought dowsing was something you did with a stick to find water," she said, still almost whispering.

"It can be—though most people are fooling themselves with that stick. It twists when tiny muscular movements tell it to. However, there is another kind of dowsing. You use a quartz crystal over a map . . . and this can be quite effective, whether you are looking for a lost object or for your heart's desire."

Elena spotted the flaw. "But, Mrs. Flowers, we don't have a map of the Dark Dimension. I mean, that's what we would need, isn't it? Souls that don't go to the Celestial Court usually wind up there, don't they?"

"Yes, my dear—although *very* wicked souls go much, much farther down, I'm sorry to say. However, I don't believe that we need to worry about that possibility with Damon."

"But a map—"

“I’m afraid that my artistic skills leave something to be desired, but I’ve been working on something since the wee hours of the morning,” Mrs. Flowers said complacently.

On the half of the kitchen table that was empty of tea cups sat a rolled-up scroll of what looked like paper. Bonnie and Elena reached it from opposite directions at the same time. Elena held her breath as together they carefully unrolled what turned out to be thin, creamy-colored vellum.

When Bonnie saw the full extent of the map, she dropped her end with a squeak. Elena held it partially unrolled, but she could tell that her own eyes were wide.

There seemed to be more ink than white space on the scroll. Mrs. Flowers had seemingly drawn in microscopic detail the entirety of the Dark Dimension: no labels on anything, but thousands of tiny polygons that might be buildings, and hundreds of sinuous lines that might be roads. There was even a river, crossed by dozens of different bridges.

“But how—even if you’ve been drawing since last night—how did you manage to get this finished? Bonnie, it won’t bite you; hold out the other side of it,” Elena added, so that she could admire the masterpiece all at once.

“Of course I wasn’t conscious while I did it,” Mrs. Flowers said matter-of-factly. “Dear Grandmama took over my mind and I wasn’t aware of doing anything until the entire process was over. Rather like automatic writing, you see.” Mrs. Flowers coughed delicately. “I . . . er, was just a little alarmed at how familiar Grandmama seemed to be with the place. I hope she herself is not a resident.”

“We met some very nice people there,” Elena said truthfully. “And *here!* This is Lady Ulma’s house. I’m sure of it. Do you see, Bonnie?”

“Ye-es, if you say so,” Bonnie agreed doubtfully. “But . . . well, what am I supposed to do with it, exactly?”

Mrs. Flowers explained and Bonnie’s brown eyes got bigger and bigger. She was desperate enough, though, Elena knew, to be willing to try anything.

After they had put four heavy weights at the corners of the map to hold it open, Bonnie

solemnly took the translucent white quartz crystal on a thin gold necklace chain that Mrs. Flowers gave her. She held the necklace by the chain over the center of the map, and the crystal swung slightly from the motion of her shaking fingers.

“When you hold it over the right spot, it should make a circle,” Mrs. Flowers explained.

While Elena watched through narrow eyes, Bonnie made the attempt. She started at the top left of the map, and, keeping the crystal about an inch above the map, she moved slowly all the way to the top right. Then, as if she were mowing a lawn, she moved her hand down a bit and covered the area from the extreme right of the map to the far left. Back and forth she went, although twice she was forced to rest her arm, the trembling of which had caused the crystal pendulum to shimmy.

But nowhere on the entire sheet of vellum did the quartz make anything like a circle.

“It’s no good,” she said at last, tears spilling over her cheeks. “The crystal doesn’t react anywhere. I don’t *sense* anything, either.”

Elena felt as tired as she knew that Bonnie was. Her nerves were stretched like harpsichord strings about to snap.

“Why? Why doesn’t it work?” she wondered aloud. “Unless”—blinking away tears of her own—“he’s been reincarnated already like you said, Mrs. Flowers.” She couldn’t bring herself to say “or he’s just disappeared,” but the words were in her mind.

I’m not there! I’m still here, Damon thought helplessly, knowing that she couldn’t hear him, that not even Bonnie could hear him through the barrier of worlds. *I’m exactly where you left me!*

“If,” Mrs. Flowers said thoughtfully, “he has already been reincarnated to some woman on earth, then we would need a globe.”

“To some woman?” Elena and Bonnie said almost in unison.

“Some pregnant woman,” Mrs. Flowers continued mildly. “That is how reincarnation works, I believe.”

Elena looked sideways at Bonnie, but Bonnie was just staring at Mrs. Flowers with brown eyes that seemed enormous in her small heart-shaped face.

Damon-as-a-baby-born-to-some-stranger didn't sound right to Elena. It would be eighteen years and some odd months before they could even approach him. And would he be a vampire? How *could* he be, in a new life? He wouldn't remember Elena or Bonnie or Stefan.

It didn't sound like a very good proposition. But . . .

"Stefan has a globe in his room," Elena said. "I'll get it."

Forget the globe! Damon thought at her fiercely. *I'm not in some woman's womb! I'm here, buried under the ash! I'm exactly where you left me!*

Elena slowly climbed the rickety staircase to Stefan's room. It was a familiar route and she would normally have no hesitation about entering his room unasked. It had been *their* room for so long; for all the time that she had to hide from the people of Fell's Church because they thought she was dead.

Still, she paused a moment and then knocked before opening the door. Stefan had other ways of entering his room than via Mrs. Flowers's front door. If he had enough Power he could fly on the wings of a falcon through the window.

She got no answer, and she walked inside. The bed was neatly made and had an air of not being slept on at all last night.

Suddenly Elena wished that Stefan wasn't the type of boyfriend to give her space. She wished that he was here with her. Come to think of it, if they were all grieving for the same person, why shouldn't he be with her? Why had he run away instead of staying to support her?

Elena tried to think of an answer as she brought the heavy globe down. It was heavy because its surface was made of semiprecious jewels. The dark blue of the deep oceans was lapis lazuli. The continents were malachite and citrine, abalone, black opal, agate, jade, garnet, peridot, amethyst and carnelian. The shallows were blue topaz.

"How beautiful, my dear," Mrs. Flowers said, beholding it.

"Those lovely stones won't interfere with Bonnie's dowsing at all. They may even enhance it."

"Good," Elena said.

Bonnie took a deep breath, with her eyes shut, clearly trying to compose herself for a second trial.

“Can you turn the globe so that different parts of it face upwards—so they’re at the top, I mean?” she asked when she opened her eyes.

The globe, fortunately, was one that allowed this, and Elena, out of wishful thinking undoubtedly, put the United States exactly at the top of the sphere.

And then Bonnie began to work.

She started with the United States, being careful with the quartz pendulum, holding it exactly one inch above whichever state was directly under the trembling crystal. Soon a sheen of perspiration formed on her brow, and several little strawberry curls stuck to her forehead.

Elena tried to be patient, waiting for Bonnie to finish—to be certain that she’d finished—with an area before moving the sphere a tiny fraction of an inch so that another state appeared below the pendulum.

Soon Elena was sweating, too. Eventually she wanted to scream. This was madness. They were sure to make a mistake, to miss some area. The world was just too big, and the globe was too small.

“Do you know, my dear, I believe I must have an old school geography book somewhere,” Mrs. Flowers said at last, just when Elena had sunk her teeth into her lower lip to keep an impatient shriek from exploding from her throat.

“Really? But—well, won’t it be a bit dated?” she asked, trying not to sound too eager to get up and stretch and use her legs and arms to some purpose.

“Yes, it will,” Mrs. Flowers replied composedly. “But it will be better than this globe. Why don’t you look in the storage room, and if it’s not there you might try the second floor bedroom closets. I don’t believe I ever gave it away, and I know I didn’t *throw* it away.”

“I’ll go and look for it,” Elena said. Then, as Bonnie glanced up and managed a tiny, preoccupied smile, she added: “Um—if it’s really okay. Is it okay?”

“It’s fine, if Mrs. Flowers doesn’t mind moving the globe for me,” Bonnie said valiantly.

“Not at all, dear, not at all.” Mrs. Flowers touched the great multicolored sphere very gently, moving it an infinitesimal amount to the right.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. Call me if you find anything!” Elena had to shout as she hurried into the front hallway. “Don’t forget to try Italy—especially Florence. Maybe sometimes lightning strikes twice!”

What Elena found in the storage room was . . . everything. Lamps, rugs, mirrors, baskets, candles, preserves, trays, empty boxes, full boxes, lawn furniture, throw pillows, old VHS tapes, a tangled forest of Christmas lights, dolls in costumes from around the world, vases of every shape and size, scarves, umbrellas, bells, coats, music boxes, silk flower arrangements, frying pans of assorted sizes, stationery, shoes—usually singletons rather than pairs—pewter goblets, doorstops, pieces of slate roofing, real cameos, outrageous costume jewelry, a feather boa, a container of assorted tools, a broken ceiling fan, frames for paintings (some with paintings in them; some without), a file cabinet full of very old papers, a first aid kit, a wedding dress carefully folded away in a square package that smelled of lavender and mothballs, a large statue of a rearing horse, and a small bust of Alexander the Great. There was more—a lot more, and all of it dusty and cobwebby—but Elena’s brain refused to catalogue it.

There were also many books, some hardbacks with no jackets and very dusty spines of the shape and size that meant they *might* be an old school geography text. But although Elena rubbed and blew away the dust on each candidate, no geography manifested itself.

At last, covered in dust, with scratches on her arms and one ankle, she got up and walked like a very old woman until she was outside the storage room. Then she could stretch her arms and legs and roll her head on her neck to relax it.

The August sun was hot on her face as she exhaled, knowing that sweat was running down the back of her neck and had collected in between her breasts, darkening her camisole and T-shirt.

She was glad that Damon wasn’t around to see her right this moment. No, she couldn’t be

glad he was gone, but she could just imagine his expression . . . she surprised herself by bursting into laughter at the same time as tears welled up in her eyes. She fought hard to blink the tears away and make them go back to where they'd come from, but they trickled out and slid down her dusty cheeks. There was no point in smearing her face by trying to wipe them away with equally dusty hands.

Elena's cellphone was silent in her cutoff jeans' pocket. Bonnie hadn't called. She hadn't located . . . anything. Elena sighed, and then, forcing herself to concentrate, she deliberately took up an aikido stance that Meredith had taught her. She imagined an opponent coming toward her, reaching for her, and she seized its hand, twisting so that the phantom's forearm turned the wrong way against its elbow. Then, with a sudden, vicious pressure, she did what Meredith had expressly told her never to do, and snapped both the radius and the ulna of her invisible attacker's arm, tearing muscles and tendons. She finished by giving a savage kick with her right knee to the groin, a move that Meredith had *not* taught her, but was purely Elena's invention.

Then she sagged. In her mind's eye she could see Meredith sadly shaking her head over her student's lack of restraint. The tall, dark-haired girl who'd been born a hunter-slayer of vampires, werewolves and other evil supernatural creatures had learned that discipline was everything. But right at this moment Elena felt no self-control at all.

Even as she thought this, Elena's head jerked up. A footfall had sounded quite near her. For an instant she stared blindly and then she made a soft noise of pure longing. Stefan had just stepped out of the shadow of a clump of cherry trees and was standing in the sunlight.

She ran to him as if she hadn't seen him in weeks. When he saw how she was moving he hurried to meet her. They came together and each clutched fiercely at the other. Elena was crying quietly and after a moment she realized that Stefan was, too.

"Bonnie can't find him," Elena said. "She's been dousing everywhere with a quartz crystal. But he's not in the Dark Dimension . . . and I can't even find Mrs. Flowers's old school geography book so that we can see if he's been reincarnated on Earth!"

"Is that what you've been doing? Looking for a school book? I thought maybe you'd been

coalmining.” Stefan first dashed his own tears away and then, very gently, used his thumbs to wipe away hers.

This small kindness almost undid Elena. She squeezed Stefan as hard as she could. This was his cue to squeeze her back, not with any significant proportion of his true strength, but much harder than he would normally do.

Elena felt better for being tightly held. Strange, but she had never wondered at all about Stefan’s expression should he see her looking as if she’d “gone coalmining.” She knew that he saw beneath the dust and beneath her fair skin as well. He saw her heart, and that was the end of his searching.

Just now he was rubbing his chin against the top of her head in a very comforting way. Elena’s last tears fell when she blinked and she was able to keep back any new ones. The coolness of Stefan’s body permeated hers even as the sun beat down on both of them, and his touch soothed all her knotted muscles and relaxed her aching joints. The only pain that was left was in her heart.

“I . . . miss him,” Elena confided abruptly, without having planned to speak at all.

“So do I.”—very softly, but with a deep component, because he was speaking with his jaw against her scalp, and she could hear him through bone conduction. He kissed her hair, so lightly that she could barely feel it.

Elena felt that there was nothing more to be said. They understood one another. They both ached to see Damon, and Stefan was not going to allow anything as petty as jealousy to break the deep and lasting communion that she and he shared.

“You know,” he said after a few minutes, speaking as calmly as before, “I have a globe in my bedroom, and—”

Elena didn’t even try to keep the words back. “I already got it,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to bother you by calling you, and I knew you wouldn’t mind. But it’s no good; a globe isn’t. It’s too small. If Bonnie had found anything, she’d have called me. That’s why I was looking for Mrs. Flowers’s old geography book.”

Stefan kissed her hair again. “I was going to say, ‘and there’s an outdated world atlas under my bed.’ It won’t be accurate about some countries’ names, but it’s better than that heavy, just-for-decoration globe or even an ancient geography book.”

“An atlas? You’re kidding!” Elena squeezed Stefan even more tightly and was hugged breathless in return. “Stefan, that’s fantastic! Let’s go get it before Bonnie exhausts herself completely using the globe.”

“Yes, let’s go.” But Stefan still hugged her hard and Elena made no move to release him from her arms.

Instead, she tipped her face up, cautiously, so as not to knock into his jaw and make him bite his tongue. Stefan tipped his face down. And then the outside world was swept away entirely and for Elena there was only joy and the sensation of floating in a cool sunrise, with myriad pastel colors all around her.

At last, reluctantly, Elena released Stefan and felt his grip ease. She took his hand and pressed it once firmly. Then they hurried back to the front door of the boardinghouse.

In the kitchen, Bonnie was leaning back in her chair with her eyes shut, drinking iced tea with a chunk of lemon in it from a tall glass. She opened her eyes just as Elena approached and sputtered, spraying Stefan’s globe and Mrs. Flowers’s tablecloth with tea, narrowly missing Mrs. Flowers herself.

“Oh, my God, Elena! You look—”

“I know. I’m going to wash in the sink. I didn’t find the geography book in the storage room, but Stefan has an old world atlas for us.”

“Oh.” Bonnie stopped hiccupping and sniffled, clearly trying to look refreshed and ready to get back to work. “Well, good,” she finished staunchly. “Because this globe is just impossible to work with. The only place where the pendulum even reacted was in the Pacific Ocean, and then it just swung back and forth.”

“Which means exactly nothing,” Mrs. Flowers said, looking genteelly distressed. “Dear

Stefan, I'm so glad you have an atlas. That will make the dousing much easier on Bonnie. I'm afraid that it's difficult to maintain absolute spiritual concentration for so long a time."

"Oh, I can do it," Bonnie said, managing a shaky smile. Her eyes met Elena's and Elena realized that Bonnie would kill herself trying rather than stop while getting negative results.

"Stefan, will you run up and get the atlas?" she asked as unemotionally as possible. "I'm going to look at Mrs. Flowers's encyclopedia set, if that's all right with her."

"Of course it's all right, my dear. But what will you be looking for?"

"Oh—well, I thought I might as well see if there's a picture of Dante's nine circles of Hell," Elena said, still without expression. "I mean, we're looking everywhere else for Damon. And there are other worlds down there, aren't there? I mean the Nether World is below the Dark Dimension, and there are still more worlds beneath it, right?"

"Ye-es," Stefan replied slowly. "Sage's father is at the very bottom, I think. I don't have any idea how the worlds above it are ordered, and I doubt that it's much like Dante's *Inferno* described, but the pendulum might take our intentions into account and react."

"Good," Elena said briskly, although she could see that both Bonnie and Stefan were horrified at the idea that Damon might be in some deep hell undergoing the tortures of the damned. She was as determined as Bonnie to find Damon, wherever he was, and that included marching into hell if necessary.

Once she'd had a chance to wash and drink some lemony iced tea, she thumbed through the musty volumes of Mrs. Flowers's antique Encyclopædia Britannica until she found a suitable painting done by Hieronymus Bosch, who had been born around the year 1450.

"Might as well get it over with before you start on the Earth," she said to Bonnie, putting the heavy book on the table as Stefan returned with his old atlas.

Bonnie gulped but picked up the piece of quartz by its golden chain. Her small hand shook so badly at first that the crystal bobbed and swung in all different directions.

Elena held the page open and stable for her. Mrs. Flowers and Stefan murmured

encouragement now and then and eventually Bonnie calmed enough to move the quartz pendulum steadily across each of the nine rows.

When she finished, Elena was finally able to take a deep breath and she saw that everyone around the table was doing the same.

“Now for the atlas,” Elena said with brittle cheer.

“Good,” Bonnie managed to say, although she was obviously having trouble sitting up straight.

“I think only one or two pages for the moment,” Mrs. Flowers put in quickly. “Spiritual powers are like any other ability. At some point you simply do too much too quickly and they run out.”

“Well . . . I suppose I could use a little nap,” Bonnie admitted. “Especially since we know that he’s not being tortured in hell somewhere and we need to get him out right away.”

“Exactly,” Stefan said.

“I mean, there’s not much rush . . . if he’s just been . . . reincarnated as some . . . somebody’s unborn baby . . .”

Elena glanced at Stefan. He smiled at her with his eyes only, and she smiled back the same way.

Bonnie had melted like a candle. She was slumped with her cheek pillowed on her crooked arm, which was on the table. In a moment she was breathing slowly and regularly, asleep as soundly as a baby in its cradle.

Stefan looked at Mrs. Flowers and Elena, his eyebrows up to ask if he should carry Bonnie to a bedroom. Elena found herself shaking her head and watching Mrs. Flowers do the same. Bonnie looked consummately comfortable—like an exhausted little kitten, Elena thought with a rush of tenderness.

Amid the tenderness, there was a tiny thread of concern. Elena didn’t want to examine it, but she couldn’t help it. It was a worry that Bonnie cared too much about Damon; that somehow she was inevitably going to get hurt.

Or . . . maybe that *I'm* going to get hurt, Elena admitted truthfully. It astonished her sometimes, that Bonnie could be so much of a woman, so much more forgiving and—well, mature—than Elena was. Wasn't it Bonnie who truly deserved, who truly had proven herself worthy of . . .

Elena turned away sharply, startled and annoyed to feel a prickling in her eyes. She reached blindly for Stefan, who, as always, was quick to console her with strong arms and soft kisses on her hair, and without asking what she was unhappy about.

Mrs. Flowers was tiptoeing out of the kitchen. Elena and Stefan followed, holding hands.

"She'll sleep for a few hours," the old woman said when they were in the foyer of the boardinghouse. "She'll wake up stiff, but much refreshed, and then we can begin with the atlas."

Stefan nodded. "Thank you for all your help," he said. Then, more slowly, with a glance at Elena: "Do you have any more of that vellum? Because I think I could make a map of the entryway to the Nether World—not that there would be much to put on it. A lot of snow. Some rocks; some cliffs. That Silver Lake where Elena got hypothermia and nearly died. That ridiculous suspension bridge—"

"Where Elena got terrified and nearly died," Elena contributed wryly because Stefan would never say it. "A trail and then that cavern and the Gatehouse of the Seven Treasures, where all those doors were," she finished.

In a distant place Damon stirred. He had been too enthralled by this moving-picture-with-an-open-window-on-Elena's-soul to react in any way, with pity or with pleasure. But now, suddenly, emotion returned to him.

I'm saved, he thought. *Now they just have to list where they went after the Gatehouse. It's only logical. I'm rescued. Hooray.*

He should have known better. His little brother wasn't known for his logical thinking, and Elena was exhausted, physically and mentally.

"And that's it," Stefan said. "If you happen to have the vellum."

I'm not saved after all, Damon thought. *I'm doomed. Alas. Woe is me.*

“Of course, my dear boy,” Mrs. Flowers said to Stefan, leading the way into a second-floor bedroom. “The vellum is here, in the closet with the rest of the art supplies. I used it because it was the biggest thing I had to draw on.”

In the closet of what Elena had always thought of as “the dull blue room” was a collection to intrigue any amateur artist. Pastels, charcoals for quick sketching, tins of water-colors, boxes of oil paints, a palette, a container of clean brushes, blank canvases, half-finished pictures, and various sizes of poster-board were all neatly arranged and dust-free. Tucked in a corner was a thick roll of vellum.

Stefan took three pieces, while Elena quickly chose a calligraphy kit with ink that looked as if it were still liquid and also a set of colored pencils.

“Maybe we could use the dining room table as a flat surface to draw on—if we’re careful,” Stefan suggested, and Mrs. Flowers smiled.

“What a good idea, my dear. Please do use it. Meanwhile, I think I might go to my own room for quick catnap.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Flowers. You certainly deserve it,” Elena said. “Stefan, could you grab some books to use to pin down the corners of the vellum so they don’t roll up?”

Stefan hastened to the bookcase (every room in Mrs. Flowers’s house had at least one) and returned with four chunky volumes.

“What? Oh, no!” Elena exclaimed, staring at the title on the jacketless spine of one of the books. She began to laugh helplessly, and after a moment Stefan and Mrs. Flowers joined in.

The top hardback Stefan was holding was a very old-fashioned school geography text, practically dust-free and plainly labeled.

* * *

Three days after the discovery of the geography book and the drawing of the entrance to the Nether World, Elena sat with her head on her hand. Mrs. Flowers was pouring herbal tea with a look of forced cheer on her face, and Stefan was leaning back in his chair with his eyes shut. Bonnie was slumped across the crowded kitchen table, the quartz crystal necklace lying abandoned near the atlas.

“It’s no good,” she said huskily. “Or maybe I’m no good. But it’s not working.”

Elena had seldom in her life felt absolute futility, with no hope of a plan A or B. Now, she had an uneasy feeling that this was a record-breaking new instance.

Bonnie had been doing almost nothing but dousing for four long days and three nights. She had gone through Stefan’s atlas and Mrs. Flowers’s old geography text page by page. She had even gone through a modern atlas that Meredith had ordered from Amazon.com and had rush-shipped to the boardinghouse once she had found out what they were doing. Meredith and Matt had visited several times in the last few days to encourage and support Bonnie, but at night it always wound up with this same group of four sitting around the kitchen table.

“Of course it has nothing to do with you,” Elena said sharply to Bonnie. “How can you even think you’re no good?” She noticed that the more anxious she felt, the sharper her voice got.

“Then it’s even worse,” Bonnie whispered. “It means he isn’t out there . . . anywhere, in any form. He’s just . . . gone. I mean, we always knew that was a possibility, didn’t we, Mrs. Flowers? You said that—Damon’s—soul could be drifting through the aether, or it could have . . . simply disappeared.” She looked up, her doe eyes enormous, begging to be told that she was wrong. Elena also noted the way she hesitated before speaking Damon’s name aloud.

“I wish,” Mrs. Flowers said slowly, her voice fluttery with an anxiety she could no longer hide, “that dear *Mama* would be more helpful. She keeps repeating the same thing, about the young witch trying her powers. And I must say that there’s no other candidate for the young witch,” she told Bonnie with the shadow of a worried smile. “You’ve been doing very well, dear child. If I had ever thought that I could do better or guide you in any way, I should have told you.”

Stefan opened his eyes. “She’s right, Bonnie, you’ve done a wonderful job.” He sat up and leaned forward. “I’ve seen your aura while you’re doing this. It’s brilliant. You’re using a remarkable amount of Power, and you’ve been patient and careful, too. But, Mrs. Flowers, what does Grandmama say about all this?”

Mrs. Flowers sighed. All at once, she looked both frail and old. Fancy Mrs. Flowers looking

old, Elena thought, startled.

“Grandmama’s in a teasing mood. She’s given me a . . . disturbing quote from a poem by Robert Service. I’m not sure what it really means—or if *she* means what it says, since she’s quite definitely an example of immortal life herself, as a ghost. Would you like to hear the quote?”

Glances all around. At last Elena spoke for all three of the listeners. “Yes. I think we *have* to.”

Mrs. Flowers nodded and spoke quietly. ““Yea, *life’s* immortal, swift it flows—alike in reptile and in rose—but as it comes, so too it goes . . .” Mrs. Flowers stopped and sighed. “And that’s all she’ll say.”

A hush fell upon the three hearers. We certainly weren’t expecting it to be as bad as like *that*, Elena thought. Stefan’s green eyes were wide, and Bonnie’s face looked deathly pale.

Now what? Elena wondered. She sought for something comforting to offer, something hopeful, but her mind was a blank.

Bonnie broke the lengthening silence by saying in a barely audible voice, “There’s something I’ve wanted to ask from the beginning. You talked about a soul drifting in the æther then. What *is* the æther, anyway?”

“I think it’s everywhere, now that the Higgs boson was discovered,” Stefan said after a moment. “It used to mean the space in between worlds.”

“So his soul . . . could be just floating around anywhere?” Now Bonnie’s face looked pinched. “What would that be like?”

“I don’t know, Bonnie. I really don’t. Elena, are you all right?” Stefan asked.

Think. Think. We’ve looked everywhere—every place we went, every place we can even think of, except the Celestial Court and we know that Damon didn’t go *there*. What are we missing? We’re missing something.

I won’t *let* you be dead and gone, she thought toward Damon. I won’t let you be floating in space. . . .

But other lines of poetry were flashing through her mind. *Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying: and this same flower that smiles today tomorrow will be dying.* Robert Herrick. *A flower unplucked is but left to the falling, and nothing is gained by not gathering roses.* . . . Robert Frost. Three Roberts in a row, and all of them warning that roses were short-lived . . .

But not souls, Elena thought more fiercely than ever. Damon, you have an immortal soul—I've *seen* it! I'll find it somehow!

What am I missing?

The others were talking in quiet voices, but Elena's concentration blocked them out. She found herself glaring at the globe from Stefan's room, at the beautiful but useless lapis lazuli oceans and the impractical continents of smoky quartz, black opal, chalcedony and malachite; at the jade green islands and the moonstone and abalone snows of the polar ice caps.

Something . . . something was nagging at her.

She found herself staring at the base of the globe and then at the ice caps once more. The base was round and sturdy, the color of steel. Base . . . abalone. Base . . . moonstone. Moonstone. *Moonstone . . .*

Moon stone.

Moon . . .

Elena drew in her breath suddenly. No, that couldn't be it. That was insane. Impossible. Too easy. It was just . . .

She reached forward, startling the others, and grabbed the globe, picking it up with both hands. Then she put it down again and took the atlas and moved it to a clear area of the kitchen table. She picked up the books that were holding open the vellum page that had the path to the Nether World scrawled on it.

"Elena, what are you doing?" Stefan's green eyes were intent.

Elena shook her head. She rolled up the vellum page together with the page that represented the Dark Dimension. There was a blank piece of vellum underneath. Elena fixed the blank vellum in

place with books at the corners.

Then she set the globe squarely in the middle.

“What? *What?*” Bonnie almost wailed. “That globe is no good, Elena, you know that—”

“I need a pen,” Elena murmured, fumbling in the messenger pouch she carried now instead of a purse. She’d taken it off when she’d first arrived this morning and it now rested on the kitchen table next to Bonnie’s. “I have an idea.” She found a pen.

“What are you—talking about?” Bonnie had to snifle in the middle of the sentence. “That globe—whatever you’re thinking—it’s just impossible to work with, and . . .”

Elena shook her head. Using the pen, she traced a large circle on the white paper by going around the base of the globe with the pen.

Then she took the gemstone globe and put it on the floor. She marked an X approximately in the middle of the circle she’d traced.

Bonnie looked at the stark circle on the paper in front of her in bewilderment. “What’s that even supposed to be?” she demanded as Elena sat down again.

“It’s half of the Nether World moon,” Elena said. Her heart was pounding hard in her chest and throat and fingertips. “It’s blank because the Tree is gone, but that X is for Damon’s body. I remember that there were pools of water in several places, but I can’t draw them and I don’t think they matter.” She dared to look at Mrs. Flowers as she said this, and she realized that she was flushed with emotion.

Mrs. Flowers was looking pensive. She murmured, “I’ll get us some fresh tea,” and fluttered off.

Elena’s eyes went to Stefan’s. He was looking more than thoughtful. He was looking startled and shocked—electrified, even.

“But that’s the one place we know that—*he*—isn’t,” Bonnie argued, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Just try it,” Elena said, looking at Stefan again.

“I mean his—his poor body might be there, but that’s all!” More tears traced their way down Bonnie’s pale cheeks.

“Give it a try,” Elena suggested gently.

“But—”

Just DO it! thought Damon, startling himself.

“All right! You don’t have to shout!” Bonnie cried.

Elena stared at her. Damon could feel her heart beating hard. Strangely, he could also feel his own heart beating. He hadn’t been able to do that before.

Bonnie picked up the crystal by its gold chain with trembling fingers. She held it up gingerly, positioning the translucent quartz over the bottom of the circle, about an inch from the vellum.

Stefan leaned forward. Mrs. Flowers came quickly back to the table with a fragrant pot of tea. She put the teapot down without attempting to pour anything into the four cups that sat at four different places on the table.

Elena leaned forward, her eyes on the quartz crystal.

“Bonnie, my dear, you might want to name that map. Aloud, I mean: just say what it represents, so that there’s no question about what you’re looking at,” Mrs. Flowers advised.

Bonnie hesitated. Elena gave her a few seconds and then said, “The circle I drew on this piece of vellum”—she touched it—“is a map of the smallest moon of the Nether World, the one on which the great Tree existed until I destroyed it: root, branch and leaf.”

Bonnie glanced at her sideways with wide brown eyes. Elena’s voice had been quiet, but not repentant. She wasn’t sorry for destroying the tree. It had already killed Damon and had been in the process of trapping Stefan, Bonnie and herself permanently in a prison of wooden branches when she’d used Wings of Destruction on it.

Elena thought of something else. “The X on the circle stands for Damon’s body. He was staked to the ground beside the trunk of the Tree.”

Bonnie was still looking at her. Now Elena looked back steadily, with a tiny, encouraging

smile. Below the table her hands were clenched together so hard that her fingernails bit into skin.

Bonnie focused on the map again, taking a deep breath. She moved the necklace so that it just touched the bottom of the circle, then slowly moved over the white space inside.

The pendulum was motionless, swinging from side to side a little as Bonnie's hand shook.

Mrs. Flowers leaned forward.

Bonnie moved the crystal toward the left and then traced out a pattern, a slow sweep of the bottom of the circle. The quartz didn't respond. She moved up an inch and swept a path going the opposite way.

She kept doing this, back and forth, inch by inch getting closer to the X. At last she was tracing the circle directly below the mark.

Elena stopped breathing.

Bonnie moved the pendulum up and approached the X slowly. Her hand began to tremble badly and the pendulum swung more and more wildly, but not in a circle. She approached the X.

Damon let his aura flare. He used all the Power he could extract from the droplets around him and his own body. He concentrated on showing the most amount of Power over the largest space possible. *Here I am!* he thought.

Bonnie reached the X.

Elena gasped. Stefan stood abruptly, his chair scraping on the tile floor. Mrs. Flowers's hand flew to her heart.

"What's happening?" Bonnie cried. Elena glanced at her quickly. Bonnie's eyes were shut. "What's it doing?" she demanded again.

"Open your eyes, my dear," Mrs. Flowers said in a breathless voice. Elena couldn't have spoken for worlds. Stefan never even looked up from the map, where the pendulum was moving in large steady circles around the X at its center.

Bonnie opened her eyes. She stared at the quartz crystal as it revolved in neat circles around and around. The circles became ovals as her hand began to shake.

Elena stood and cupped Bonnie's hand in both her own, trying to keep it still. But Elena's hands were none too steady, either. It took Stefan, who put his hands around Elena's, to make the trembling stop and the ovals go back to circles.

Bonnie was staring at the crystal in amazement. "I'm not doing it," she said. "I swear I'm not."

"You're not doing it," Stefan assured her. "Your hand is still."

"But that means—he's there, where his body is. His spirit is right beside his body!"

Elena and Stefan exchanged looks. They both glanced at Mrs. Flowers.

"I think," Stefan said judiciously, "that that would be too much of a fluke."

"I'm afraid, dear Bonnie, that it would be asking a great deal of coincidence," Mrs. Flowers said in a faint, soft voice.

Elena still couldn't say a word. Her voice was stuck.

"You mean . . ." Bonnie started over. "Are you saying . . ."

"His soul isn't beside his body," Stefan said, all at once sounding quiet and flat. Elena noticed how dark his green eyes seemed. "His soul is *inside* his body."

"But that means—that means that—he came back from being dead!" Bonnie's voice was thin.

"We don't come back," Stefan said, still quietly. He hesitated a moment, and then spoke in a rush. "I didn't want to say it before, because I didn't want to crush your hope all at once. And after a while, I just . . . I didn't know how to say that all the work you'd done was pointless. But I never believed he could come back. Sage told him that it was the whole reason Sage had become a vampire. It was so that when he died, he wouldn't be sent back to his father's Infernal Court. 'One lifetime is enough,' was what he said. Vampires . . . just don't . . . come back."

"But then—" Bonnie looked at Elena for help.

Elena didn't have any help in her. She thought, personally, that she might faint at any second.

Bonnie turned back to Stefan. All the while, her hand remained hovering over the X, while the quartz crystal described circles around it, smaller and smaller circles, as if a signal was dying

away.

“That means,” Bonnie choked, seeming to understand that she was going to have to speak her thought aloud by herself, “that we left him there—we left him . . . *alive*.”

Stefan said, “Yes.”

“We just—we abandoned him—and he was still alive!”

“Yes.”

“But how could we do that?”

“Bonnie, dear . . .”

“It’s my fault,” Stefan said. “I closed his eyes. I said he was gone.”

“What difference does it make whose fault it is?” Elena blurted, startling herself, because she hadn’t realized she was going to speak until she heard her own voice. It was almost as if someone had said it *through* her.

Just get the hell back out here, Damon thought in conclusion, allowing his aura to shrink back to normal dimensions.

In the boardinghouse kitchen, Bonnie had whirled on Elena. Before, she had been sobbing or wailing her concerns. Now, she seemed to Elena like a small animal at bay.

“You can’t say anything about it,” she shrilled. “You weren’t even conscious! It was Stefan and I who—we should have waited longer!”

“Bonnie, we were suffocating in falling ash,” Stefan said—gallantly, Elena thought.

“You weren’t suffocating! You don’t need to breathe. *I* was suffocating!” Bonnie turned her trapped-animal look on him.

“And so was Elena,” Stefan said. “She needed to breathe even though she was unconscious.”

“But we left him when he was alive!”

Stefan laughed. For a moment the sound was uncertain, but then it became more positive, more natural.

“Yes. Yes, Bonnie! And because he was alive then, he’s alive now and we can find him!”

Bonnie stopped in mid-wail with her mouth open. “Oh. *Oh!* Oh, my God!”

“Yes,” said Stefan.

“Yes, my dears,” said Mrs. Flowers.

“Oh, my God!” Bonnie jumped up in excitement. “We need to tell Meredith and Matt!” She grimaced after a moment. “Maybe Matt won’t be as excited as we are, but still . . .”

“Yes, let’s tell them,” Stefan said. His eyes were sparkling spring green again.

Far away, on the tiny moon of the Nether World, Damon thought, *I’m saved. I’m really saved this time. Hooray.*

He should have known better.

Elena, who hadn’t spoken in a long while, but who was now being examined by three pairs of eyes: one of brown, one of green, and one of blue, said bluntly, “But how do we find him? How do we *get* there?”

Damon thought: *I’m doomed. Alas. Woe is me.*

Damn.

He slumped, exhausted from advertising his aura so flagrantly. Ash continued to pile up over him, burying him with layer out of layer of darkness.

Doomed, he thought again, with a gloomy sort of satisfaction.

Damon went to sleep.

* * * * *

Damon woke with a start. He’d been dreaming a long time, like a sated predator after gorging on a kill.

Automatically, he checked the wards and spells of warning he’d placed around the room after Stefan had left.

Nothing. No creature, supernatural or human, had been sniffing around the perimeter of the building

Damon tested the air, casting about with tendrils of Power to see who else was stirring. It

was just after dawn; pale light shone in through the window. In dorm rooms all around, alarms were sounding and students were groaning. Time for Elena to wake up, too. But not to go to classes.

Damon wanted to see the girl at Beckley Memorial Hospital in Heron. If they could only talk to her, he was certain that they would get the answers to some very puzzling questions.

And, just maybe, the questions to some very puzzling answers.

*A sepal, petal, and a thorn
Upon a common summer's morn—
A flask of Dew—A Bee or two—
A Breeze—a caper in the trees—
And I'm a Rose!*

—Emily Dickinson

To be continued in the next scenes from

Evensong

**Part Two:
The War of Roses**